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Opening Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman Chairman, Committee on Energy and Commerce

Public Sales of Hurricane Katrina/Rita FEMA Trailers: Are They Safe or Environmental Time Bombs?

Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection
April 28, 2010

I thank Chairman Rush for calling this hearing to examine the decision to sell to the American public travel trailers that could have elevated levels of formaldehyde.

Many of us are familiar with these trailers. As Chairman of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, I called the hearings that exposed the dangerous levels of formaldehyde in some of these trailers and the shameful failure of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to protect the families living in the trailers.

Our investigation revealed that after hearing reports of high formaldehyde levels, FEMA field staff had urgently asked the agency to test its trailers so that dangerous trailers could be identified and families protected. But FEMA headquarters ignored the dangers of formaldehyde. Their response was that if FEMA tested the trailers and found hazards, FEMA would “own” the problem, so they did nothing.

The ultimate result was a serious health risk for families displaced by Hurricane Katrina and a costly bill for taxpayers. After our hearings exposed FEMA’s conduct, the agency was finally forced to act. FEMA paid \$2 billion for trailers that have now been sold for pennies on the dollar.

I fully support Chairman Rush’s effort to understand the story behind the sale of these trailers to the public. I hope today’s hearing will reveal that the Obama Administration has learned from the mistakes of the previous Administration. If these trailers are going to be sold, it is essential that there are ample safeguards to prevent any risks to the people who end up buying these trailers.

Today’s hearing will also shine a light on the longtime deficiencies of the Toxic Substances Control Act, an outdated statute that is badly in need of reform. As we will hear

today, if the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had the clear and comprehensive authority that it needs to assess and restrict dangerous chemicals, it could have taken action on formaldehyde years ago. And if EPA had set a standard for formaldehyde emissions from plywood and composite wood products, we might not have had this problem in first place.

Again, I thank Chairman Rush for holding this hearing, and I look forward to the testimony of the witnesses.